

VZCZCXRO1188
RR RUEHMA RUEHPA
DE RUEHAB #1276/01 3201555
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 161555Z NOV 06
FM AMEMBASSY ABIDJAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2169
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ABIDJAN 001276

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB IV](#)

SUBJECT: UNION OF STATE-OWNED NEWSPAPER THREATENS STRIKE
ACTION IN PROTEST OF DISMISSAL OF DIRECTOR GENERAL

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On October 30, 2006 the board of influential government-owned newspaper Fraternite Matin (FratMat) dismissed Director General Honore De Yedagne (close to the FPI) and replaced him with Leon Lebry Francis, an ally of PM Banny. On November 6 the union for employees at FratMat, the &Syndicat des Agents de Fraternite Matin,8 (SYNAFRAT-MAT) threatened a strike in protest of the dismissal of the former DG. This episode reflects continued jockeying between supporters of President Gbagbo and Prime Minister Banny. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Who, What, How: The Ministry of Communications, run by Junior Minister and former NGO leader Martine Coffi-Studer (Prime Minister Banny is also the Senior Communications Minister as well as the Senior Finance Minister), recently undertook an audit investigating the organizational and financial operations of the newspaper at the request of the board of Fraternite Matin. The board, composed of members appointed by the Ministries of Communication, Telecommunication, Culture, Finance, Labor, and Education and the Prime Minister's office, held an extraordinary meeting to review the results of the audit and recommended emergency measures. Voting unanimously, the Board quickly dismissed Director General Honore, accusing him of &outrageous mismanagement8 and replaced him with Leon Lebry Francis, reportedly an ally of Prime Minister Banny.

¶3. (SBU) The Immediate Result: On November 6 the union for employees at FratMat, the &Syndicat des Agents de Fraternite Matin,8 (SYNAFRAT-MAT) threatened a strike in protest of the dismissal of Honore, alleging the action violates the rules governing the management of parastatal firms. SYNAFRAT-MAT, generally supportive of the FPI, also denounced the presence of armed police at FratMat's HQ to enforce the dismissal. However, another FratMat union (more aligned with the opposition), the &Syndicat des Agents Libres des Employes de Fraternite Matin8 (SYLE-FRATMAT), has come out against the threatened strike and instead proposed negotiations with the Ministry of Communications.

¶4. (SBU) Honore's Counterattack: Honore's camp argues that as Fraternite Matin is legally under the financial supervision of the Ministry of Finance, any legitimate audit must be carried out under its guidance. The audit resulting in his dismissal was carried out by an independent auditing firm, UNICONSEIL, at the behest of the Ministry of Communications. The outcome of the audit was not made available to the former DG, who claims that far from being mismanaged, under his leadership, the paper has begun to turn a profit. According to Honore, the Board does not have the authority to dismiss him, but only to propose a dismissal which must be confirmed by the Council of Ministers and a Presidential decree. Honore asserts that under FratMat's bylaws, a Director General can also only be appointed by decree after approval by the Council of Ministers as the result of a proposal by the Minister of Communications.

15. (SBU) Honore Says It's Personal...: Honore claims his dismissal is the result of personal settling of scores between himself and Junior Minister Coffi-Studer. Honore publicly stated that his first clash with Coffi-Studer occurred in 2002 when he was new to the position of Director General and Coffi-Studer was the head of advertising firm Ocean. According to Honore, she was unhappy about the reduction from 25% to 15% in Ocean's advertising discount with the paper, a reduction insisted upon by Honore, bringing Ocean's discount in line with those offered other advertising firms.

16. (SBU) ...And Political: Perhaps more important is the political dimension: Honore claims his resistance to Coffi-Studer's direct involvement in the editorial section of Fraternite Matin was a key factor in his removal. Much of the ongoing commentary on the issue underscores the degree to which this controversy either was or has become a proxy fight between Banny's camp and the FPI. In any case, Honore says that that &he will fight the state-sponsored gangsterism8 through the courts.

17. (SBU) Comment: While other papers in Cote d' Ivoire openly declare their support for one party or another, Fraternite Matin advertises itself as being a state-owned, independent source of information that is &neither partisan nor neutral8 (its official byline) offering the government's point of view. However, in reality it has become increasingly biased in support of the President and does not reflect the fact that this is, in effect, a coalition government. Recent stories highly critical of the Prime Minister, the international community and the recent UNSCR 1721 resolution underscore this reality and have undoubtedly contributed to the move to oust Honore. End comment.

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